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SUBJECT: SHIA MINISTERS WARNS HIZBALLAH WILL "GO ALL THE
WAY," URGES COMPROMISE

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (S/NF) Mohammed Khalifeh -- the resigned Minister of Health allied with Nabih Berri -- warned the Ambassador in a 11/14 meeting not to believe disinformation that Hizballah is backing down. Claiming to have been visited the previous evening by Hizballah officials Wafiq Safa and Hassan Fadlallah, Khalifeh said that street demonstrations will escalate from small sit-ins to widespread job strikes meant to topple Siniora's cabinet by bringing the country to an economic standstill. Hizballah will "play the confessional card" to ensure widespread Shia participation, and Michel Aoun and pro-Syrian Sunnis and Druse have agreed to join the demonstrations later, when their participation would appear spontaneous. Berri, unhappy at the intransigence of Hizballah but trapped within the Shia alliance in which he is a junior partner, will stay out of Lebanon for a more more days, Khalifeh said, in hopes of reconciliatory-sounding language from the March 14 majority. Khalifeh urged international political intervention to broker a compromise by which the cabinet is expanded to include Aoun, the critical "more than one third" cabinet vote is given to someone considered neutral, and Siniora agrees to running the cabinet by consensus (often to be worked out in closed-door sessions with Berri) rather than voting. Khalifeh predicted that, unless such a compromise is proposed soon, Hizballah will escalate over the course of the next few weeks, at which point the Hizballah demands will become even higher. Hizballah, Khalifeh said, will win if the fight is taken to the street, so all efforts must be found to avoid street clashes. End summary.

HIZBALLAH DECIDED ON RESIGNATIONS,
LEAVING ONLY THE TIMING FOR BERRI

2. (S/NF) Khalifeh (who, despite having resigned from the cabinet on Saturday, ushered his somewhat embarrassed Ministry office director holding files out of his living room when the Ambassador arrived at the Khalifeh apartment) announced that Berri, intervening from Iran, had ordered him to attend an Amal strategy meeting the previous day, despite the fact that Khalifeh is not an Amal member. This unusual step illustrates Berri's level of worry. Khalifeh was struck by the unhappiness expressed by Amal members about the course Hizballah has chosen for them. Khalifeh noted that he was "not in agreement" with the decision by the Shia ministers to

quit the cabinet. Nevertheless, with Hizballah playing on Shia confessional sensitivities about neglect at the hands of Sunni, Christian, and Druse, Amal and its allies had no choice but to go along. The decision to resign on Saturday was Berri's, Khalifeh said, as Berri was annoyed that Siniora was proceeding with a Monday cabinet session on the international tribunal without what Berri considered sufficient consultation with Berri. But Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah had already decided that the ministers would resign, so Berri's role was simply related to timing.

BERRI DOES NOT CONSIDER
CABINET UNCONSTITUTIONAL

13. (S/NF) Khalifeh was at pains to distinguish Berri's position from that of Lahoud. Berri, he noted, in his public remarks from Iran accepted the Siniora cabinet's endorsement of the UN tribunal drafts. Berri does not describe the cabinet as illegitimate or unconstitutional. Khalifeh laughed and nodded when the Ambassador asked whether Berri might be privately quite pleased that the tribunal passed the cabinet while Berri was out of town and thus absolved of responsibility. But Berri is unhappy with being cornered by Hizballah and unhappy with March 14 leaders for refusing to deal seriously with any proposed cabinet change. Khalifeh said that he did not believe that Berri would return home from Iran tonight (11/14) as scheduled but would remain abroad for a "few more days" in hopes of some kind of opening from the March 14 side. Asked whether there was hope Amal ministers might return to the cabinet, Khalifeh responded that "the door isn't closed."

HIZBALLAH VISITORS OUTLINE

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GRIM SCENARIO TO TOPPLE SINIORA

14. (S/NF) Khalifeh cautioned the Ambassador not to mistake some reductions in the temperature of rhetoric for a signal that Hizballah is backing down on its insistence of either having a blocking minority or an entirely new, friendlier cabinet. Hizballah will "go all the way," he said, "even if that means destroying Lebanon." He said that he was "shocked" by the visit he had received the previous evening from Hizballah officials Wafiq Safa and Hassan Fadlallah. Talking with Khalifeh as if he were a willing co-conspirator, they outlined a plan for crippling the country. They will start out with modest sit-ins and then escalate street demonstrations. Hizballah will order all Shia employees to walk off their jobs and close down all Shia-owned enterprises. Because Hizballah will portray its desire to change the government in confessional terms, they will achieve nearly 100 percent Shia participation. The country will approach economic collapse.

15. (S/NF) At some point, perhaps using a pretext of poor social conditions, pro-Syrians like Omar Karami, Talal Arslan, Suleiman Franjeh, and others will call their followers to the streets. Michel Aoun will join in as well. While Aoun et al. have agreed to this plan, they want their participation to look spontaneous, so Aoun will continue to say for now that he has no intention of sending his followers to the street. Hizballah is hoping to avoid outright violence but will not rule it out, if violence is needed to get Siniora to resign. All of this will unfold, Khalifeh said, over the next 4-6 weeks.

MARCH 14 STRATEGY WILL LEAD
TO HIGHER HIZBALLAH DEMANDS

16. (S/NF) Khalifeh said that a March 14 "show of strength" through counter demonstrations and a March 14 refusal to

compromise will lead to catastrophe. Hizballah will win on the street, at great cost to Lebanon. And when Hizballah wins on the street, then its demands will be much higher. Now, March 14 can pay a much smaller price that does not hand the country to Hizballah control.

HOPING INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION
WILL LEAD TO COMPROMISE

¶7. (S/NF) Saying that March 14 leaders are unable to see their way on their own to a compromise, Khalifeh urged that international players like France, the United States, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia broker a deal. In Khalifeh's mind, the deal would include the following elements: a cabinet expanded to 30, in which Aoun participates. Exactly one third of the cabinet would be controlled by a combination of Amal, Hizballah, and Aoun. The March 14 alliance would have 18 or ¶19. One or two ministers would be considered neutral, perhaps even to the extent of committing in advance not to vote, no matter what the issue. This formula would deprive the March 8-Aoun alliance of the one-third-plus-one share needed to threaten the cabinet with resignation at any moment and to block cabinet action. At the same time, the March 14 alliance would have less than the two-thirds support needed to push decisions through. In addition, Khalifeh said, maybe Siniora could agree not to bring controversial matters to a cabinet vote at all but work then behind the scenes with Berri and others, to allow the cabinet to operate by consensus.

¶8. (S/NF) Commenting that Khalifeh's formula sounds tailor-made for cabinet gridlock, the Ambassador asked whether, in this deeply polarized country, there were really "neutral" candidates for ministerial slots. Even if the candidates agreed not to vote, they could still join Hizballah, Amal, and Aoun in resigning from the cabinet. "That can be solved," Khalifeh said, musing that perhaps they could report to an outside authority such as the Patriarch, who would have to give the nod before they could resign. The details can be worked out, Khalifeh said, but the March 14 leaders need to send a signal to Berri that they are ready to try for a compromise before Hizballah takes the country to the point of no return. "I am telling you," Khalifeh said, "if they (Hizballah) take to the street, the price will be much higher."

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HIZBALLAH DESPERATE?

¶9. (S/NF) The Ambassador asked Khalifeh about Hizballah's real motivations. After all, with the exception of the tribunal, Hizballah had already been able to use the fear of an informal "confessional veto" to exercise great influence over the Siniora cabinet -- influence far greater than Hizballah's two ministerial portfolios would normally suggest. Knowing of Hizballah sensitivities, Siniora intentionally will avoid tabling some issues before the cabinet, and he scrupulously works on all government appointments to Shia slots with Berri, meaning Hizballah is brought on board. What more does Hizballah want? Is this all about the tribunal and UNSCR 1701?

¶10. (S/NF) Khalifeh responded that, while the tribunal and 1701 are certainly part of Hizballah's concerns, there is a "psychological problem." The tribunal and 1701 are concerns for Hizballah's regional backers, but the "psychological problem" is purely domestic and of great worry to Hizballah leaders. Hizballah tells its followers that it won the war with Israel. Yet Hizballah's followers do not see victory. Instead, they see ruins. Worse, Hizballah's fighters are deeply unhappy that the unfettered freedom they used to enjoy in the south has vanished under the UNIFIL and LAF deployment. For all practical purposes, Khalifeh said,

Hizballah has been disarmed in the south, for Hizballah cannot use its arms in the south. So now Hizballah has to show its followers that the victory has been translated into more shares and say in the government. The fight with Siniora's cabinet distracts the Shia from thinking about Hizballah's so-called victory. In a way, Khalifeh said, 1701 has proven too effective in constraining Hizballah, so Hizballah is now concentrating its considerable power and popularity on internal matters.

COMMENT

¶11. (S/NF) Khalifeh, while not an Amal member, accurately reflects the views of his political patron, Nabih Berri, but has the virtue of speaking more candidly. He hates Hizballah and Hizballah's pretensions of speaking for all of Lebanon's Shia. Yet at the same time, he fears Hizballah's popularity and will not publicly break with Hizballah. A respected surgeon not known for hyperbole, he seemed truly alarmed by what his Hizballah visitors told him of their plans for the coming weeks (although, for all we know, his visitors could have been engaging in some kind of psyops to try to spook a reluctant ally into becoming more supportive). We do not believe that March 14 leaders are in any mood to listen to Khalifeh's idea on a compromise, but we'll float it, citing its author. While intriguing, Khalifeh's idea falters on the theory that there are truly neutral, credible players in Lebanon today who could assume the key ministerial role of blocking one side or another from monopolizing power. And, once again, avoiding cabinet gridlock would rest entirely on the ability of PM Siniora and Speaker Berri to come up with a backroom understanding on each controversial item the cabinet would discuss. In that, Khalifeh's formula sounds very much like the cabinet that existed before the Saturday resignation. And, while far from idea, that is certainly a better cabinet proposal than what Michel Aoun and Hizballah want.

FELTMAN